Let the Great World Spin: A Novel by Colum McCann

Wonderful And Insightful Reading

Amazon Best of the Month, June 2009: Colum McCann has worked some exquisite magic with Let the Great World Spin, conjuring a novel of electromagnetic force that defies gravity. Its August of 1974, a summer hot and serious and full of death and betrayal, and Watergate and the Vietnam War make the world feel precarious. A stunned hush pauses the cacophonous universe of New York City as a man on a cable walks (repeatedly) between World Trade Center towers. This extraordinary, real-life feat by French funambulist Philippe Petit becomes the touchstone for stories that briefly submerge you in ten varied and intense lives—a street priest, heroin-addicted hookers, mothers mourning sons lost in war, young artists, a Park Avenue judge. All their lives are ordinary and unforgettable, overlapping at the edges, occasionally converging. And when they coalesce in the final pages, the moment hums with such grace that its memory might tighten your throat weeks later. You might find yourself paused, considering the universe of lives one city contains in any slice of time, each of us a singular world, sometimes passing close enough to touch or collide, to birth a new generation or kill it, sending out ripples, leaving residue, an imprint, marking each other, our city, the very air—compassionately or callously, unable to see all the damage we do or heal. And most of us stumbling, just trying not to trip, or step in something awful.

But then someone does something extraordinary, like dancing on a cable strung 110 stories in the air, or imagining a magnificent novel that lifts us up for a sky-scraping, dizzy glimpse of something greater: the sordid grandeur of this whirling world, bigger than its buildings, bigger than its inhabitants. --Mari Malcolm

Amazon Exclusive: Frank McCourt on Let the Great World Spin

Frank McCourt was born in 1930 in Brooklyn, New York, to Irish immigrant parents, grew up in Limerick, Ireland, and returned to America in 1949. For thirty years he taught in New York City high schools. His first book, Angela's Ashes, won the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Critics Circle Award and the L.A. Times Book Award. In 2006, he won the prestigious Ellis Island Family Heritage Award for Exemplary Service in the Field of the Arts and the United Federation of Teachers John Dewey Award for Excellence in Education. He is also the author of Tis and Teacher Man, both memoirs. Read his exclusive Amazon guest review of Let the Great World Spin: Now I worry about Colum McCann. What is he going to do
after this blockbuster groundbreaking heartbreaking symphony of a novel? No novelist writing of New York has climbed higher, dived deeper.

Trust me, this is the sort of book that you will take off your shelf over and over again as the years go along. It’s a story of the early 1970s, but it’s also the story of our present times. And it is, in many ways, a story of a moment of lasting redemption even in the face of all the evidence.

There are dozens of intimate tales and threads at the core of Let the Great World Spin. On one level there’s the tightrope walker making his way across the World Trade Center towers. But as the novel goes along the “walker” becomes less and less of a focal point and we begin to care more about the people down below, on the pavement, in the ordinary throes of their existence. There’s an Irish monk living in the Bronx projects. There’s a Park Avenue mother in mourning for her dead son, who was blown up in the cafés of Saigon. There are the original computer hackers who visit New York in an early echo of the Internet. There’s an artist who has learn to return to the simplicity of love. And then—in possibly the book’s wildest and most ambitious section—there’s a Bronx hooker who has brought up her children in “the house that horse built” —“horse” of course being the heroin that was ubiquitous in the 70s.

All the voices feel realized and authentic and the writing floats along. This was my city back then—and now. McCann has written about New York before, but never quite as piercingly or as provocatively as this. This is fiction that gets the heart thumping.

The stories are interweaved so that it is one story, on one day, in one city, and yet it is also a history of the present time. In Let the Great World Spin, you can’t ignore the overtones for today: suffice it to say that the novel is held together by an act of redemption and beauty. I didn’t want to stop turning the pages.

I’m really not sure what McCann will do after this, but this is a great New York book, not just for New Yorkers but for anyone who walks any sort of tightrope at all. And yes, it doesn’t surprise me that it takes an Irishman to capture the heart of the city... —Frank McCourt

(Photo © Kit DeFever)

I am so glad I decided to get this book and read it. Based on all the reviews, I was sure I couldn’t go wrong. It is as good as others have said. I had a hard time putting it down once I started it.

It takes place in New York City in 1974. A man is attempting to walk on a tightrope between the towers of the World Trade Center. This is the center of the story but not the story itself. There are a cascade of characters we meet, hookers, drifters, socialites, computer hackers,
judges, the list goes on. It is a time of a lot of drug abuse and the Viet Nam War. All this plays a part in this most magnificent story.

The power of Colum McCanns writing takes us to a time and place that mirrors the future and all thats to come and all that weve lost.

Simply said, you must read this book.

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